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May 9, 2003

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The Honorable Tommy G. Thompson  
Secretary  
Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Thank you for your March 21 letter in response to my correspondence on the Joint World Health Organization (WHO)/Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Expert Consultation on Diet, Nutrition, and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases. I appreciate learning of all of your activities to combat the obesity epidemic, and I recognize your willingness to pursue solutions to this serious public health problem.

I would like to follow up on one portion of your letter, in which you again criticize the WHO draft report for classifying sugar-containing soft drinks as a “probable” cause of obesity. You wrote:

The first draft of the WHO/FAO report contained conclusions that were inconsistent with the body of the evidence. For example, the expert consultation considered “probable,” the evidence that sugar sweetened soft drinks and juices increase the risk of obesity even though there has been only one longitudinal study that has supported this association. According to the expert consultants’ own criteria, this recommendation should have been considered “insufficient” because only one study supported the association.

I do not understand this response. The criteria used for a “probable” designation in this report were:

Evidence based on epidemiological studies showing fairly consistent associations between exposure and disease, but where there are perceived shortcomings in the available evidence or some evidence to the contrary, which preclude a more definite judgement. Shortcomings in the evidence may be any of the following: insufficient duration of trials (or studies); insufficient trials (or studies) available; inadequate sample